

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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A routine task sometimes is not, as more than one may learn.



MISS ATKINSON, the senior stewardess, appeared at the rear of the cockpit. "Guess what, Captain?"

I glanced back. A rather swarthy man stood behind her with a revolver in one hand.

"According to the passenger list, his name is Hernandez," Miss Atkinson said.

Hernandez smiled. "I wish to consult with you, Captain."

There was a .45 automatic concealed beside my seat, within fingertip reach. In response to public indignation with regard to previous hijackings, the airline had furnished its senior pilots with the weapon and one hundred and twenty-seven restrictions limiting its use.

I turned the controls over to my copilot and moved into the rear compartment where we joined Fitzhugh, my flight engineer.

"If you make no trouble," Hernandez said, "I will make no trouble. I merely wish to return to Havana."

"There will be no trouble," I said. "I assure you of that."

He smiled again. "I will now take the precaution of personally directing your copilot to make the

turn toward Cuba. No one is to leave this compartment or I will begin shooting." He disappeared into the cockpit.

Fitzhugh is a rather eager young man. He lowered his voice. "How will he *know* we're really traveling to Havana or not, Captain? He doesn't have a compass in his stomach. What we could do is slowly bring the plane back to due east and head for Miami. It's pitch-dark and only an experienced airplane pilot could distinguish the lights at the Miami airport from those in Havana."

I shook my head. "No. As soon as we make the landing he'll realize that we're in Miami and probably begin shooting everybody in sight."

Fitzhugh disagreed. "What we do is radio ahead. When we land, plainclothesmen could be waiting. It might be a good idea to have them chattering in Spanish, to give it that authentic touch, you know. I'm sure that Miami must have scores of detectives who can speak Spanish."

"I see," I said. "And so when we land, Hernandez hears the Spanish and joyfully surrenders his revolver to what he believes are the Havana police?"

"Exactly."

"And just how do you intend to transmit all these instructions by

radio to Miami while Hernandez is in that proximity?"

Miss Atkinson stepped into the breach. "I'll lure Hernandez to the rear of the plane."

"And just how do you intend to do that?"

She regarded me pityingly. "Captain, he is a man and I am a woman."

I smiled firmly. "Miss Atkinson, so far Hernandez appears content with merely hijacking the plane. Please do not give him any other ideas. After all, he does have a gun and that spells *carte blanche* to anyone with imagination."

"I wasn't going to lure him all the way to the baggage compartment," Miss Atkinson said. "Just to the galley. And besides, I've always got my judo to fall back on."

"No," I said. "I cannot risk the safety, welfare, or morals of any member of my crew. Especially a stewardess."

Fitzhugh came up with another idea. "Why don't we just jump him when he comes out of the cockpit?"

I smiled grimly. "Has it occurred to you that while we are in the process of 'jumping' him, he might fire that revolver of his? Even if he misses us, suppose that one of the bullets pierces the skin of the ship and we lose pressure? Do you

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realize that the company would be endlessly harassed with lawsuits from near and far relatives of the deceased passengers?"

Fitzhugh went along on that. "I know my wife would sue the company if *I* died. And my parents. Especially my mother. I'm her favorite, you know."

I nodded. "Therefore we play it safe and cooperate with Hernandez. Leave things as they are. Don't rock the plane. And that's an order."

Hernandez returned from the cockpit and established rather liberal ground rules, allowing us movement about the ship, as long as he had at least one of us within sight as a hostage.

I went to the galley, informed the junior stewardess of the situation and cautioned her not to tell the passengers of the situation. I would inform them myself later as we prepared to land in Cuba.

I had a long cup of coffee and when I returned to the flight engineer's section, I found Fitzhugh standing triumphant with a revolver in his hand.

Hernandez lay on the deck, obviously unconscious.

"What happened?" I asked automatically.

"When we hit that downdraft he got off balance and I jumped him," Fitzhugh said. "I'm fast

whenever I set my mind to it. He didn't have a chance once I got moving."

I glared at him. "I thought I gave specific orders not to try anything rash. Suppose he'd fired the gun and pierced the ship's side?"

Fitzhugh smiled. "No danger, sir. I had the copilot ease the plane down to two thousand feet. Hernandez never knew."

I took a deep breath. "Fitzhugh, you went over my head. You *know* that I am the senior pilot and the captain of this ship."

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "But what's done is done, and besides, it was successful, wasn't it?" He tested the weight of Hernandez's revolver and found something wanting. He broke open the weapon. "The gun isn't loaded."

Miss Atkinson regarded the fallen Hernandez with new sympathy. "He didn't want to hurt anybody. Isn't that nice?"

"Captain," Fitzhugh said, "I'd better get your automatic."

"What for?" I said. "It isn't loaded either."

Fitzhugh was shocked. "Not loaded?"

I flushed. "I've lost the clip somewhere."

"I'll get the gun anyway," Fitzhugh said. "*I* know the gun isn't loaded, and *you* know the gun isn't loaded, but does *Hernandez*

know that the gun isn't loaded?"

Fitzhugh disappeared into the cockpit and returned with my automatic. He tossed Hernandez's empty revolver onto the enclosed bunk we use for naps.

Hernandez moaned, opened his eyes, and eventually sat up. He tested his jaw for mobility.

Miss Atkinson brought him a paper cup of water.

"*Gracias*," he said, and drank. His eyes went to the revolver on the bunk.

"Don't try it," Fitzhugh rasped authoritatively, "or I'll blow your head off!"

Hernandez got slowly to his feet.

Fitzhugh regarded him sternly. "Do you realize what the penalty is for air piracy? I happen to know that the *minimum* is twenty years in prison."

Hernandez unbuttoned his suit coat and presented an expanse of shirtfront. "Shoot me!" he demanded. "Shoot me! I would sooner die than go to prison."

"Well, now," Fitzhugh said uncertainly. "Don't take things that seriously. The twenty years isn't necessarily a *hard* minimum. There's always time off for good behavior, or maybe a Presidential pardon as soon as our relations with Cuba improve."

"No," Hernandez said firmly.

"It is time for me to join the great revolutionary movement at home or to die in the attempt." He smiled tolerantly. "You may shoot me while I am engaged in attempting to reclaim my revolver. I am sure this can be classified as self-defense and it may perhaps ease your conscience."

Hernandez moved over to the revolver and picked it up.

"Ha!" Fitzhugh said. "A lot of good that will do you. We happen to know that your gun isn't loaded."

Hernandez smiled and broke open the revolver. He reached into his pocket. Before Fitzhugh had time to say more than, "Hey!" Hernandez expertly slipped cartridges into the empty chambers. He snapped the revolver shut. "My weapon is not unloaded now." He showed white teeth. "So we will now have a toe-to-toe shoot-out?"

Fitzhugh quickly dropped his automatic. "Hold it! My gun isn't loaded."

Hernandez obviously controlled the situation once again.

Fitzhugh looked at me ruefully. "Well, anyway, it took courage. I mean, him moving in the face of a gun that—for all he knew—was loaded."

I conceded the fact that Hernandez had courage. I also had the suspicion that he had not been

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quite as unconscious as suspected when we discussed our lack of ammunition.

Hernandez turned to me. "Captain, you will please mention to the Cuban authorities that I was willing to die rather than be kept from my country."

"I'll sign an affidavit," I said.

"How about some coffee?" Miss Atkinson asked.

All of us, including Hernandez, seemed to find this agreeable and he permitted her to go back to the galley.

She returned with a tray fifteen minutes later.

I tasted my coffee. "This is strong enough to walk."

"I like mine strong," Hernandez said gallantly. He took a healthy gulp of the dark liquid. His face whitened almost immediately. He sank to one of the stools and the revolver slipped from his fingers.

Fitzhugh, ever ready, pounced immediately upon the weapon. "Ah, ha!" he said. "The tables turn once again."

I glared at Miss Atkinson. "What the devil have you done to his coffee?"

"I mixed a concoction from the first aid kit in the galley," she said. "Aspirins, iodine, vitamin tablets, and anything else I could lay my hands on. I made the coffee extra strong to kill the taste."

I stared at the perspiring Hernandez. "Good heavens, you've killed the man!"

She was immediately contrite. "Oh, dear."

"Quick," I said. "Back to the galley and get some milk and a wastebasket. And hurry."

She sped to the galley and returned immediately with the required items.

I forced the milk down Hernandez's throat and it had the desired effect.

After a minute or two he was considerably shaken, but I had the feeling that he would survive.

Fitzhugh pulled a sheet from the bunk and began tearing it into strips. "The safest thing to do is to tie him up before he comes up with something else."

I sat down on one of the stools and sighed. "Miss Atkinson, go to the rear and calm the passengers."

She blinked. "But they're already calm. They don't know that anything's happening."

I pointed a finger. "Just go, woman, go."

Fitzhugh finished trussing up Hernandez and propped him into a corner.

The hatch through which Miss Atkinson had departed a minute before, now reopened and a young man stepped inside.

His hair was shoulder length, his

beard scraggly, and he wore a somewhat dirty Nehru jacket. A large medallion swung from his neck, and blue jeans and sandals completed his ensemble.

He pulled a long knife from the broad belt under the jacket and cleared his throat nervously. "I want to go to Cuba."

I looked at Hernandez. He managed a weary shrug. "I never saw him before in my life."

Fitzhugh once again rose to the occasion. He swung a mighty blow at the new intruder. He missed completely—however, the effect was still achieved.

The medallion-wearer fainted dead away.

Fitzhugh rubbed his hands. "I'll tear up a few more sheets."

I hated to do it. I really did. But when Fitzhugh's back was turned, I swung the butt of my empty automatic against the rear of his skull. He dropped without even a groan.

I used my pocketknife to free Hernandez. "Now for heaven's sake, don't drink any more coffee, keep your eye on the altimeter and the compass, don't get lured into the galley, and above all, keep a firm grip on your damn gun."

Hernandez was still a sick man. "I'll try," he promised wearily. "I'll try."

"Now tie up Fitzhugh," I or-

dered. "And above all, gag him."

Hernandez finished that job and I resumed my role of hostage just as Miss Atkinson returned.

She took in the new situation and sighed. "I think it's very selfish of Hernandez to hijack an entire plane and put more than seventy passengers through all this inconvenience. Why couldn't he just hire some private plane to take him to Cuba? After all, it isn't really very far from Miami or Key West to Cuba."

"I doubt if Hernandez could find anyone to make the trip no matter how much money he might be prepared to offer," I said. "The Cubans would undoubtedly confiscate the plane and are just as likely as not to regard the pilot as a spy and sentence him to prison."

Miss Atkinson looked worried. "How long do you think the Cubans will hold us?"

"Nowadays it's usually less than two hours."

She was relieved. "That isn't very long."

"No," I said, "not long at all."

We landed at Havana just after three in the morning. The Cuban police and the military swarmed over the plane and I was permitted to untie Fitzhugh.

He rubbed his head. "What happened?"

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head and then recovered the gun."

Fitzhugh frowned. "What were you doing when this happened?"

"My back was turned when I heard you drop. I spun around, but it was already too late. He had the gun."

"How in the world did he free himself? I'm rather good with knots, and I could have sworn that no human being could untie them, much less wiggle out."

"He had a razor blade concealed up his sleeve."

Fitzhugh still frowned. "That's rather odd. I mean that people—even people who hijack planes—don't usually carry spare razor blades up their sleeves. How could he anticipate that he would be tied up?"

"Oh, shut up," I said.

After we returned to Miami, we were interviewed by newspaper reporters and company officials, but eventually I found myself alone in a small office with Mr. Jonas.

"What will they do to the medallion-wearer?" I asked.

"He'll spend a few months in a Havana jail while the psychiatrists have a go at him. If he passes that hurdle, they'll send him to the cane fields for six months to see how his revolutionary fervor holds up un-

der hard labor. The odds are that after about two weeks of that he'll get disenchanted and want out. The next time we hear about him he'll probably be in Canada praying for some kind of an amnesty so he can go back to Berkeley."

"And Hernandez?"

"One of our best agents. He's been thoroughly conditioned to survive the head-shrinkers and the cane fields. After that it should be clear sailing." Mr. Jonas, who is rather high in the Central Intelligence Agency, smiled. "Hernandez is an expert in worming his way into organizations. We expect big things from him in three or four years."

I sighed. "Frankly, I wish I'd been kept ignorant of the real purpose of the hijacking."

"We debated that," Jonas said, "and then decided that at least the senior pilot ought to know what was really going on—just to forestall any unfortunate accidents." Jonas puffed his cigar. "You had your troubles, of course, but the mission *was* successful."

A thought came to me. "Have you ever smuggled American agents into Cuba this way before?"

He said nothing, but he smiled.